

## Contained Uncertainty: Turkey's June 2018 Elections and Their Consequences

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Turkey's presidential and general elections, held on 24 June 2018, marked a significant turn in Turkish politics. The controversial referendum of 2017 narrowly approved constitutional amendments that replaced the parliamentary system with an executive presidential one. With the 2018 presidential vote those amendments took effect, sealing Turkey's transition into a presidential system.

- Strategically, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan relied on contained uncertainty, which generated hope among the opposition, gave legitimacy to the elections, and simultaneously perpetuated a sense of despair through the common belief that he would win by any means necessary.
- The elections, held under a state of emergency, were among the most unjust in Turkey's recent history. Despite the extremely unfavourable conditions, and the sobering cynicism after election night, the opposition has revived its can-do spirit that had been lost after the 2013 Gezi protests.
- The presidential system granted Erdoğan the opportunity to legalise and institutionalise his existing one-man rule. Since his inauguration on 9 July 2018 as the first executive president, Erdoğan has embarked upon a complete overhaul of the state apparatus, with a hands-on micromanagement style.
- The elections hardly brought stability to the country. The looming economic crisis, social polarisation, the Kurdish conflict, the war in Syria, and troubled foreign relations will likely determine the course of future events.

### Policy Implications

*The elections of 24 June 2018 did not deliver Turkey's long-awaited normalisation, but paved the way for the institutionalisation of granting emergency powers to the executive. Turkish civil society will be completely smothered if left to the country's inner dynamics. The European Union can do more than expressing its "deep concerns" about Turkey's de-democratisation and act in line with its criticism in the latest progress report.*

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## Hope and Despair

In a whirlwind of political changes, Turkish citizens went to the polls six times in the last four years. Despite this high number of elections, 24 June 2018 still marks a turning point in Turkish politics. Constitutional changes that replaced the parliamentary system with a presidential one went into effect, as Turkey elected its first executive president with unprecedented powers. It was also the first time Turkey voted for its president and Parliament on the same day.

Under the incumbent Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) 16-year hold on government, the opposition had never been more hopeful about the election outcomes. The math was simple: In the last presidential elections in 2014, Erdoğan won with 52 per cent of the vote against a weak rival and barely won last year's constitutional referendum, with 51 per cent. Now, in 2018, with more competent candidates in the picture, the opposition could capitalise on the looming Erdoğan fatigue and capture at least enough votes to force him to a second round. However, Erdoğan again won the first round of presidential elections, with 52.6 per cent, and his AKP secured 295 of 600 seats in Parliament. Many observers were taken aback by the election results, which defied most poll projections. For the opposition, hope turned to despair. Nevertheless, the question remains of how we are to interpret Erdoğan's win.

Attempts to decipher Erdoğan's outright victory cited either the resilience of identity politics or electoral fraud (KONDA 2018; Ciddi 2018). This resonates with the pre-election debate between those seeing the elections as a done deal and those considering the stakes to be higher than ever. In fact, elections do still matter in Turkey, but considerably less than in a consolidated democracy. As a general rule, democracy is considered a system of "organized uncertainty," in which the procedures are certain, while the outcomes are not (Przeworski 1991:13). That uncertainty of outcomes motivates different interest groups to commit to the shared rules of the democratic game and subject themselves to competition. This is in contrast with closed authoritarian systems, in which the outcomes are certain, but the procedures are not (Karl 1990). In Turkey, neither procedures nor outcomes are certain. Elections may still retain an element of surprise but the uncertainty of outcomes is contained by uncertain procedures, such as several measures the government has taken in order to achieve the desired results.

This contained uncertainty works both ways, generating mixed feelings. Although considerably diminished, uncertainty painted a façade of a true competition, in which everyone had their options from which to select a candidate. It created genuine hope among the opposition to end Erdoğan's long winning streak and legitimised the election outcomes. The contained part of the uncertainty, however, rendered all hope fragile and perpetuated a sense of desperation arising from Erdoğan's aura of invincibility and the widespread belief that he would do whatever it took to win the elections. No one imagined a scenario in which the Turkish president would accept defeat and peacefully abdicate power. He would win by any means necessary, as demonstrated by his re-running the general elections in 2015 and the allegations of ballot stuffing on a colossal scale in the 2017 constitutional referendum. At the end, it was perfectly clear that Erdoğan set the game, determined the date, altered the rules, orchestrated the media, outmanoeuvred his rivals, and ultimately won.

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## Timing of the Elections

The executive presidency was Erdoğan's biggest dream for which he had strived so diligently for years. He even built his presidential palace, four times larger than the Palace of Versailles, almost four years earlier. The timing of the elections was crucial to that end. After having insistently denied the speculations about an early election, he announced in mid-April 2018 his "sudden" decision to push the parliamentary and presidential elections forward by 17 months to 24 June 2018. Choosing the earliest possible date among all those proposed, such as 24 August (proposed by his junior ally, the Nationalist Action Party [Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP]) or 15 July (the second anniversary of the 2016 abortive coup) evinced several risk calculations:

1. The economic outlook: Unrestrained borrowing and stimulus spending provided Turkey with a spectacular 7.4 per cent growth rate in 2017. Erdoğan wanted to grab the chance to take credit for this remarkable performance and translate it into votes before the economy got overheated. Yet, he also had larger concerns as the general economic indicators were not so promising. The Turkish lira successively hit new lows, losing 27 per cent of its value against the US dollar in the first half of 2018. The dramatic weakening of the lira also stirred inflation, signalling a depreciation spiral. In February 2018, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned Turkey about its increased vulnerabilities, such as "large external financing needs, limited foreign exchange reserves, increased reliance on short-term capital inflows, and high corporate exposure to foreign exchange risk" (2018). With the Turkish economy running out of steam, keeping voters content through campaign spending could not be sustained all the way through to the original date for the elections, November 2019.
2. The militant nationalist tide: For a very long while, the Islamist designation did not quite fit Erdoğan. Instead, an Ottoman-flavoured, Turkish nationalism has informed his discourse and policies, especially since the 2013 Gezi protests. Nationalist vigilantism has long been deliberately infused into popular culture through several television series on Ottoman sultans, revolving around the Turks' struggles against domestic and foreign enemies (Taş 2018). The 2016 abortive coup and the Turkish military's operations in Northern Syria and Iraq were fertile grounds to buttress this militant vigilantism and garner more votes. Erdoğan could reasonably hope to use the rally-around-the-flag effect of the recent Afrin offensive. <sup>[1]</sup>
3. Catching the opposition off guard: Erdoğan clearly wanted to ambush his opposition by giving them only two months to campaign. Apparently, neither the media speculations on snap elections nor Erdoğan's campaign-like Anatolian tours alarmed opposition leaders enough for them to act earlier. At the end of April, the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) had not come up with a presidential candidate. The second-largest opposition party, People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), was discussing whether or not to nominate Selahattin Demirtaş, the party leader in jail. Meanwhile, the eligibility of the newly formed Good Party (İyi Parti, IP) to run for Parliament was still in question.
4. Eliminating strong rivals: For many observers, the call for early elections had a more specific agenda intended to curb the rising momentum of Meral Akşener,

<sup>1</sup> Afrin, a small district in northern Syria, was taken from the People's Protection Units, known as the YPG. Turkey sees the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK), which has been in an armed conflict with the Turkish military for more than four decades.

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who had broken off from the MHP and formed the IP in October 2017. The Turkish Iron Lady was a charismatic figure who could appeal to the electoral base of the AKP. An early election could disqualify Akşener's party. According to Turkish electoral law, a political party was eligible to run elections if it held its party congress at least six months prior. The IP had missed the 24 June 2018 election date by four days. The problem was solved thanks to the party's legal manoeuvring and the CHP's unexpected resolution to transfer 15 of its MPs to the IP to ensure Akşener's eligibility. Akşener also took advantage of the third option at her disposal, gaining another path to candidacy by collecting more than 100,000 voter petitions and filing them with the Supreme Election Council. Nonetheless, this interparty solidarity counteracted Erdoğan's calculations.

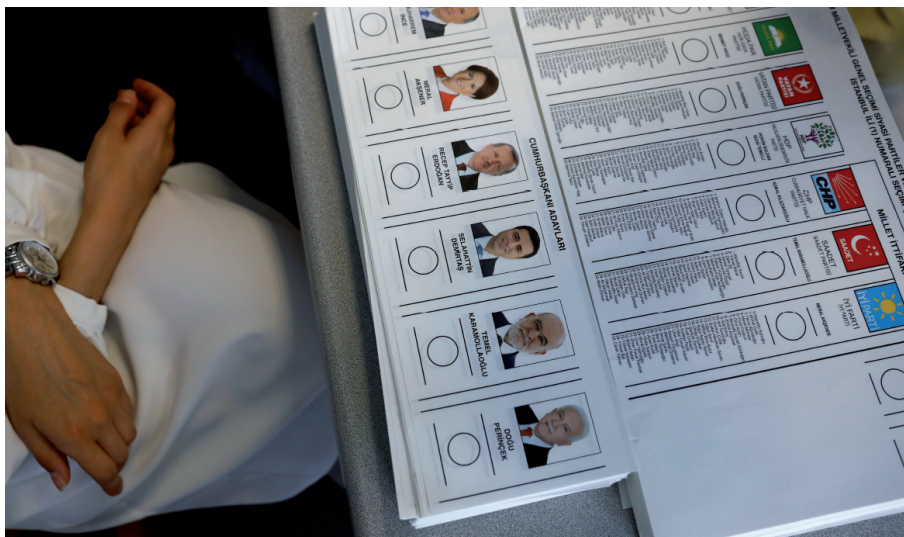
More importantly, the early elections were meant to eliminate a more threatening potential candidate, Erdoğan's long-time comrade and former president Abdullah Gül, whose entourage was preparing the groundwork for his presidential candidacy. Coming from the AKP, but appealing to broader segments of society, Gül would be a true challenge for Erdoğan if the elections were held on time. However, Gül's insistence on being the joint candidate of the opposition, Akşener's resistance, and Erdoğan's counter-manoeuvres nullified this possibility in the face of the short time allotted for campaigning.

5. The after-effect of local elections: The AKP's poor performance in big cities during the 2017 constitutional referendum, growing discontent about major AKP municipalities (especially in Istanbul and Ankara) and Erdoğan's ensuing purge of six key mayors to revitalise his party raised questions about the next local elections scheduled for March 2019. In this regard, pushing the presidential and general elections forward intended to circumvent the possible adverse knock-on effect of local elections.

## The Election Set-Up

The June 2018 elections showed a tripartite structure. In order to retain its parliamentary majority, the incumbent AKP entered into the electoral People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı), comprising the far-right MHP and the fringe, conservative nationalist Great Unity Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi, BBP). In reaction, the opposition formed the unlikely Nation's Alliance (Millet İttifakı), comprising the secular CHP, the centrist/nationalist IP, the Islamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP), and the center-right Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP). The last two are rather minor parties, but retain symbolic value that would work against Erdoğan's plan to reduce the elections into a right versus left, or religious versus secular polarisation. The left/pro-Kurdish HDP ran as a third force; however, so as not to alienate nationalist voters, it was not accepted into the Nation's Alliance. The presidential elections saw an abundance of competent candidates. The People's Alliance united around Erdoğan's candidacy, whereas opposition parties ran with their own presidential candidates:

CHP – Muharrem İnce, IP – Meral Akşener, SP – Temel Karamollaoğlu, and HDP – Selahattin Demirtaş (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
**Ballot Papers for**  
**24 June 2018 Presi-**  
**dential and General**  
**Elections**

Source: © Reuters/  
 Umit Bektas.

The mission report of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted the “lack of conditions for contestants to compete on an equal basis” (2018). In fact, the considerable level of contentiousness in Turkey’s twin elections does not necessarily qualify them as true competitions. Contentiousness does not equal *political competition*, which requires several other conditions, such as *electoral vulnerability* (the incumbent’s safety of tenure), *availability* (electoral elasticity to change party preferences), and *decidability* (different parties communicating their clearly distinguishable offers to the electorate) (Bartolini 1999). In the June 2018 presidential and general elections, the government hindered these elements through various means.

First, using the state powers to advance his own victory, Erdoğan started the elections with a big head start. As the longest-serving leader in republican history, he amassed vast powers during 16 years of hands-on micro-management, shaping state institutions to his best interests and staffing them with party loyalists. Eventually, all the ideological and repressive state apparatuses, from state media to police forces, were at his disposal without any proper checks and balances. All officials responsible for running or monitoring the elections gained or held onto their posts due to their loyalty to the government. At a broader level, Erdoğan reaped the built-in advantages of incumbency and created an extensive patronage network by providing direct social assistance reaching millions of households. During the election campaign, the AKP government authorised new, twice-yearly cash bonuses of TRY 1,000 (approximately EUR 135) to 12 million retirees. This was part of a social benefits package worth more than EUR 3 billion. This populist distributive politics aimed to appeal to the voting preferences of vulnerable groups who depended on the state and saw the social assistance as coming directly from Erdoğan.

Second, running the elections under a state of emergency created an unfair playing field. The day the snap elections were announced, the state of emergency was also extended for the seventh time. In this security-driven context, the police were given the right to arrest anyone without needing a court order, and the government administration possessed the mandate to curb freedoms of expression, media, and assembly. The state of emergency, which had remained in place since the 2016 abortive coup, was actively used against any segments of opposition. It was alarm-



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ing when the AKP government declared the CHP leader a national security threat and imprisoned the HDP leader, along with eight other MPs. The emergency rule placed severe restrictions on the opposition parties' ability to hold rallies. It created a climate of fear, in which human rights activists were detained on bogus terrorism charges and many civil society organisations were closed down.

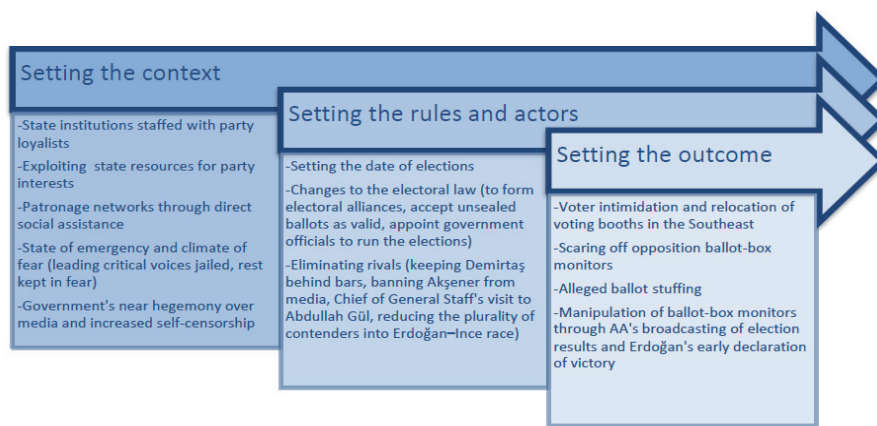
A third factor was the AKP's penetration of the national media. The post-coup trauma and the emergency decrees were used to silence alternative voices by closing many media outlets and arresting critical journalists. Doğan, the largest minimally independent media group in the country, was sold to a government-loyal conglomerate only weeks before the snap elections. This reinforced the government's nearly complete monopoly over the media, leading to major disparities in news coverage of Erdoğan compared to his rivals and largely squeezing the opposition out of existence. Considering that television is still the main news source in Turkey, the disproportionately unequal TV air time restricted voters' ability to make informed choices.

Fourth, Erdoğan altered the rules of game in his favour before going into the elections. The amendments to the electoral law that the government rushed through Parliament only one month prior to the elections allowed political parties to band together – a move by the AKP designed to circumvent the 10 per cent electoral threshold for its ally MHP and retain the parliamentary majority as a bloc. [2] The amendments also allowed acceptance of unsealed ballots as valid, which was widely interpreted as a move to legalise electoral fraud. Moreover, the amendments empowered the governors to relocate the polling stations on security grounds and allowed law-enforcement officials to enter the stations to maintain security. Especially in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, such measures were meant to suppress voter turnout and intimidate Kurdish voters.

2 This amendment was later used by the opposition and helped the IP to enter Parliament.

Fifth, Erdoğan also put a lot of effort into neutralising his opponents. Demirtaş was kept behind bars on trumped-up charges of terrorism. Meral Akşener, the right-wing challenger, was left in limbo, as her IP was disqualified from contesting the election. Several bans imposed by the Electoral Board and the state-appointed governors hampered Akşener's campaign in the following weeks, while she received almost no air time on government-controlled media outlets. Likewise, Abdullah Gül withdrew from candidacy, claiming that he could not get enough support from the opposition. However, during the negotiations between Gül and the opposition leaders, he received a visit from Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar and Erdoğan's special adviser and spokesperson İbrahim Kalın. Considering the country's long history of military tutelage, this was widely interpreted as an intervention into the process.

Already accustomed to the unfavourable conditions of Erdoğan's rule, the opposition instead focused its attention on the blatant interventions, such as ballot stuffing and vote rigging. The allegations in this regard, especially in the Southeast, still require critical insight (Aydoğan 2018). However, the aforementioned conditions already set the election to give Erdoğan his victory, and made 24 June 2018 the most unjust election in the country's recent history (Figure 2).



**Figure 2**  
**Setting the Game –**  
**AKP's Measures to**  
**Contain the Electoral**  
**Uncertainty in the**  
**Long, Medium, and**  
**Short Term**

Source: Author's illustration.

Note: AA = Anatolian Agency, Turkey's official news agency.

## Contending Populisms at Play

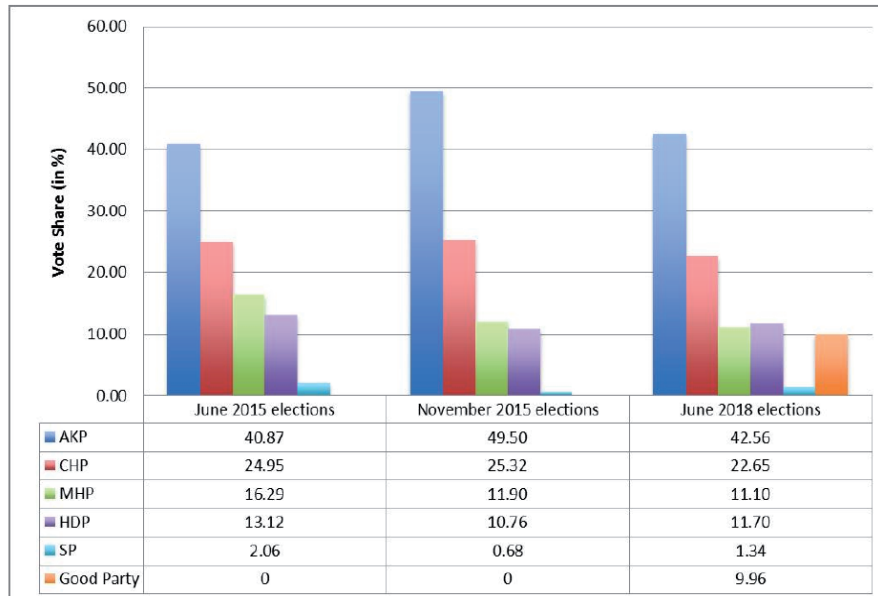
Despite the hostile environment, CHP candidate Muharrem İnce ran a campaign beyond expectations and created a broad wave of enthusiasm in a short time. İnce was the most challenging political leader among all those Erdoğan encountered since coming to power in 2003. After the 2013 Gezi protests, one of the largest manifestations of civil society activism in Turkey's history, the secular groups under Erdoğan's suppression fell into dead silence even when the government fiercely attacked the secular flagship newspaper *Cumhuriyet* or arrested prominent opposition figures in waves. İnce reinvigorated the long-lost self-confidence of the defeatist opposition. His witty style and strong rhetorical skills contributed to his successful campaign. Most importantly, he countered Erdoğan with his own weapon of populism (Erdoğan et al. 2018). Turkey's powerful leader long based his rhetoric on anti-establishment sentiments, drawing on a dichotomy between the oppressive secular elite and the alienated pious masses. He described himself as a "black Turk" and escalated in power via a narrative of victimhood, claiming to represent all segments ostracised by the Kemalist regime (Taş 2015). İnce adopted the same rhetoric of state–society cleavage but directed it against Erdoğan, negating his claim to be the authentic voice of the people: "I am the black one of the country. Erdoğan is the 'white Turk'" (*Cumhuriyet* 2018). This counter-narrative of victimhood intended to bolster İnce's claim to represent all the underdogs of Turkey's new establishment in Erdoğan's regime.

It would be no exaggeration to describe İnce as the mirror image of early Erdoğan, with all his inclusionary EU-friendly rhetoric, narratives of victimhood, and aspiring political ambitions. He drew big masses across Turkey, as shown in his large vibrant rallies. Yet, these rallies also helped the AKP consolidate its conservative base. The Turkish leader played the identity card as usual. His old trick to polarise the votes around AKP vs. CHP (or right versus left) would again work in his favour, as right-wing voters comprise approximately two-thirds of the country. To this end, he rarely targeted his only right-wing major contender Akşener in his speeches, but instead literally banned her from media. By ignoring the presence of the Islamist SP or nationalist IP among the ranks of the opposition, Erdoğan picked İnce as his only rival and fiercely attacked him in his rallies. This accumulated the anti-Erdoğan votes around İnce, but also clouded the plurality of candidates by rendering the elections an Erdoğan versus İnce race – a binary choice Erdoğan deliberately strived to create.



## Quo Vadis “New Turkey”?

President Erdoğan and his nationalist bloc were victorious in the June 2018 elections, which saw an 87 per cent voter turnout. The opposition figures were powerful enough to mobilise their bases, but not enough to appeal to the other bloc and shift party loyalties (Figure 3). A proper analysis of election outcomes and the dynamics at play would require extensive field work and forensic data analysis, yet we still have the question of what comes next.



**Figure 3**  
**Overall Results in the Last Three General Elections**

Source: Author's illustration based on data provided by the Turkish Statistical Institute ([www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt\\_id=1061](http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1061)) and Supreme Election Council ([www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/24-haziran-2018-secimleri/77536](http://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/24-haziran-2018-secimleri/77536)).

The new system eradicates division of powers and presents a strong executive presidency, with no solid checks and balances. The president appoints the vice presidents, ministers, and high state officials; controls the budget; and has extensive powers to rule the country by decree and dissolve Parliament. It still would be a bold statement to argue that the elections ushered in a totally new era. President Erdoğan already enjoyed such sweeping powers by direct or indirect means. He will remain as the one person governing Turkey. However, he now has the opportunity to solidify and institutionalise his one-man rule using a *party = government = state* formula, which was used to describe Turkey's one-party regime in 1930s. Since he was sworn in as Turkey's first executive president on 9 July 2018, successive presidential decrees were released to rebuild the “New Turkey.” While Erdoğan handpicks top officials, the future of the nation's civil servants is now completely tied to political loyalty.

The debate as to whether or not Erdoğan will need his MHP ally in Parliament appears redundant, given the overall much diminished role of Parliament in Erdoğan's imperial presidency. Besides, the mutually beneficial AKP–MHP alliance is in sync, and the current distribution of parliamentary seats does not grant the opposition sufficient power to challenge the government. Erdoğan may still try to buy off some MPs from MHP or the Good Party to gain the parliamentary majority. However, the new system enables Erdoğan to appeal to his base directly, so he might even cut the AKP loose if he feels the party is a liability to his own success. Conversely, cementing his own regime as the “New Turkey” requires vast human capital in terms of civil and military bureaucracy, for which Erdoğan, in the first decade of the 2000s, relied on the Gülenists. In this regard, his alliance with the

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MHP is more than just an electoral one, as it also underlines his effective use of the latter's power in bureaucracy. In fact, considering Erdoğan's collusions with the ultranationalist (*ülküci*) and anti-Western Kemalist (*ulusalcı*) cliques, it is ironic to observe how Erdoğan has leaned on the dirty deep-state alliances of "Old Turkey" in order to establish his "New Turkey."

Regarding the opposition, the new system means less space for institutional politics. Traditional institutional forms of political mediation have now become obsolete. Critical voices are suppressed even within Parliament, diminishing hopes for a democratic change. Despite the revived soul of Gezi, the inner dynamics seem so far to have fallen short of bringing democracy to the country. On the one hand, despite all the state resources he mobilised, Erdoğan could not get far beyond 52 per cent of the vote. On the other hand, liberal democracy still has almost no base in Turkey, regardless of the outcome of the elections. The anti-Erdoğan opposition is not a democratic bloc united around liberal principles. That is why Erdoğan was always able to divide the opposition and find allies from among his opponents to pursue his anti-liberal policies.

For a long while, Turkey has been politically and geographically split into three parts. The urban coastlines in the West vote for the CHP, the Kurdish-populated East/Southeast votes for the HDP, and the conservative Central Anatolia and the Black Sea region align with the AKP (and to a lesser extent, the MHP and the Good Party) (KONDA 2018). There is hardly anything to hold these three parts together and integrate them into a society as a whole. Yet, Erdoğan's rhetoric only deepens the divisions among them. Indeed, the June 2018 elections rewarded Erdoğan's conspiratorial, divisive rhetoric and his heavy-handed suppression of the opposition. Therefore, despite expectations of long-awaited normalisation that presidentialism would slow him down, Erdoğan keeps on the same polarising and repressive track, as shown by the vindictive tone in his recent speeches and ongoing waves of arrests. Although the state of emergency has ended in the wake of the elections, new anti-terror legislation normalised some emergency powers granted to the executive, such as a three-year extension of the power to dismiss government officials without due process and to curb freedom of assembly (Schenkkan 2018).

The European Union's bilateral relationship with Turkey since the elections demonstrates that it keeps following its *quid pro quo* approach. Immediate concerns, such as the refugee deal or counterterrorism, have so far prevented the European leadership from enforcing solid pressure on Turkey's anti-liberal practices. Turkey has been a gatekeeper for the European Union and a buffer zone between the latter and millions of Syrian refugees as well as violent extremists in the region. For the European Union and the United States, Turkey's authoritarian turn is not a core concern, as long as European/American citizens are shielded from the purge and Turkey maintains its loyalty to the West as a NATO member and strategic ally, instead of flirting with Russia. For Erdoğan, who needs legitimacy in the global arena, such a transactional relationship with the European Union and the United States serves as his lifeblood to build his own republic. Nevertheless, EU leadership must be reminded that authoritarian populism cannot be contained the way that Syrian refugees can. The emergence of anti-liberal majoritarian governments in the heart of Europe demands a more holistic approach to tackle the crisis of democracy. Therefore, the European Union needs to uphold the rule of law and human rights as a priority to preserve the European ideal.

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In the short run, there are now two more challenges facing the unassailable leader of the New Turkey. One is the local elections, originally scheduled for March 2019. The opposition, although suffering from intra-party leadership crises, considers this vote as a last chance to challenge Erdoğan. The other is the well-documented deterioration of the Turkish economy that necessitates major structural reforms. Erdoğan is well aware that the 2001 economic crisis paved the way for his rise in the first place, so another may lead to his demise. Yet, considering his concerns for the upcoming local elections, how much he can go beyond window-dressing remains a question. However, anything less than the overdue structural reforms will be too little too late to take Turkey onto a path to recovery. In this regard, appointing his son-in-law Berat Albayrak to the job of economic chief only deepened concerns that Erdoğan will not adopt a stewardship role in monetary policy anytime soon. Erdoğan no longer has an inspiring narrative to mobilise his masse, but holds all the spoils of incumbency, which he distributes accordingly to ensure their loyalty. The pace and severity of the economic downturn will determine if patronage will suffice to ameliorate its harsh effects. In addition, deep fissures in society, the Syrian war on its borders, and troubled foreign relations will all impact Turkey's trajectory. Apparently, darker days are ahead and the only way to go is through.

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